



DONAL COOPER AND JANET ROBSON

The Making of Assisi

THE POPE, THE FRANCISCANS AND THE PAINTING OF THE BASILICA

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frontispiece Basilica of San Francesco, transepts and nave of the Upper Church (detail of fig. 5).

The Making of Assisi





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Finally, although this is a joint project, there are some acknowledgements which can only be made individually.

*

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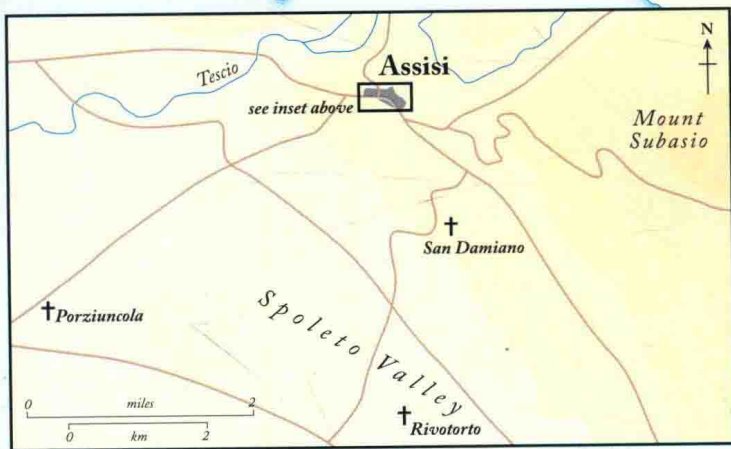
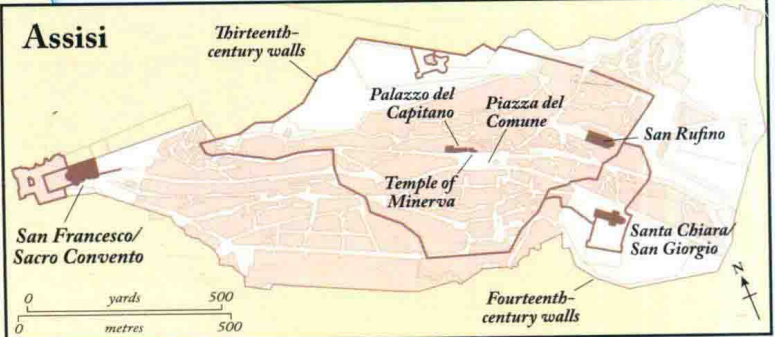
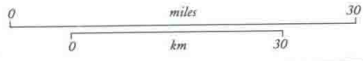
I owe my interest in art and the past. My final thanks go to little Serena, who arrived in time to see this book appear, but just late enough to allow her father to finish his share of writing it. DC

I consider myself very blessed that both my parents were teachers. My father, Kenneth, taught me to love history and the joy of sharing it, and my mother, Eileen, how to commu-

nicate that love to others in the classroom. My deepest regret is that they are no longer around to see this book published, but their boundless faith in me endures. In 1986, when my partner Peter suggested we go on holiday to Assisi, little did he know what a life-changing idea that would turn out to be. He was beside me the first time I stepped inside the Upper Church, and has since accompanied me on every stage of my Assisi adventure. Without him, *lux non esset*. JR

Central Italy

c.1288



Note to the Reader

Ground Plan of the Basilica

The orientation of the Basilica of San Francesco is unusual in that its apsidal end points west rather than east. Indeed, in liturgical terms it can be said to be ‘occidented’ rather than orientated. This may, in part, have been a pragmatic solution to the Basilica’s awkward site, on falling ground beyond the city wall at the western end of Assisi. But it also expressed the Basilica’s status as a papal foundation, the Upper Church having been designed to accommodate the specific demands of the papal liturgy. The Basilica of San Francesco shares this distinctive reverse alignment with the major papal basilicas in Rome, notably Saint Peter’s, Santa Maria Maggiore and Saint John Lateran. In the papal liturgy the priest celebrated Mass standing on the far side of the altar, looking across the *mensa* to face the congregation (*versus populum*). This differed from general liturgical practice during the later Middle Ages, according to which the priest celebrated on the near side of the altar, facing east (*ad orientem*), with his back turned to the congregation. In the Upper Church at Assisi the high altar was sited at the head of the nave with the papal liturgy in mind. The two side altars in the transepts were intended for the ordinary liturgy of the Franciscan community. They were orientated accordingly, set up against the eastern walls of their respective bays, even though this means they face away from the apse.

For clarity, we use the magnetic compass when describing the Basilica’s architecture: the façade to the east, the apse and high altar to the west, etc. So the north wall of the nave is the right-hand wall as the viewer faces the high altar and the south wall of the nave is the left-hand wall. Most of the existing literature on Assisi applies the same coordinates.

We number the bays in the nave of the Upper Church from one to four, proceeding from the altar end towards the counter-façade. For a ground plan of the Upper Church, see fig. 47. For a plan of the fresco cycles in the nave of the Upper Church, see fig. 90.

Biblical Texts

Latin texts are taken from the *Biblia sacra vulgata* (Vulgate Bible) and English texts from the Douay–Rheims Catholic Bible, Challoner Revision (DRB), which is a revised, literal translation from the Vulgate. Names of biblical books are anglicized versions of the Latin names used in the Vulgate. Where book names in the Vulgate and DRB substantially differ, both names are given. Psalms are numbered according to the Vulgate and DRB (which differ from Protestant Bibles). Parallel texts of the Vulgate and DRB can be consulted at www.drbo.org.



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Introduction

In the second half of May 1288 a set of documents arrived at Assisi that would transform the Basilica of San Francesco (figs 1 and 2) and ultimately alter the course of Western art. Even before opening them, the friars of the Sacro Convento (the Franciscan monastery adjoining the Basilica) would have felt the weight of the leaden seals, sewn with hemp to the bottom of the parchments, and recognized their sender. These were papal bulls, dispatched from the curia at Rieti some fifty miles to the south, where they had been composed on 14 and 15 May.¹ There were two different letters, and the friars at Assisi received two copies of each – the four parchments are still preserved in the Sacro Convento's archive.² Although their texts differed, the two epistles repeated the same incipit – *Reducentes ad sedulae* – and are known jointly by that name. The bulls were addressed to senior Franciscan officials: the provincial minister of Umbria, the custodian of the Sacro Convento and the minister general of the whole Order. Their lead seals bore the stylized heads

of the apostles Peter and Paul on the front (fig. 3), and on the back the inscription 'Nicolaus PP. IIII' (fig. 4): Pope Nicholas IV, born Jerome of Ascoli, elected only three months before and the first Franciscan friar to sit on the throne of Saint Peter.

The Pope's 'Remedy' for Assisi

Nicholas's letters were the catalyst for one of the most ambitious artistic projects of the later Middle Ages, the frescoing of the nave of the Upper Church of San Francesco (fig. 5). As well as narratives from the Old and New Testaments, the decorative scheme would include the most famous set of images in the whole Basilica: the life and miracles of the Order's founder, Saint Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), set out in twenty-eight scenes and known today simply as the 'Saint Francis cycle'. Given that the *Reducentes* bulls are often identified as key documents for the renewal of the Basilica's fabric and architecture at the end of the thirteenth century, it is surprising how rarely they are quoted in the original, and stranger still that they have never before – to our knowledge – been translated into English. Since the two

facing page 1 Aerial view of Assisi from the west, with the Basilica of San Francesco and the Sacro Convento in the foreground.



2 View of the Basilica of San Francesco and the Sacro Convento from the south.

letters will run like a thread through this book, Nicholas's words are worth reproducing here in full. His first, shorter, epistle of 14 May addressed the minister of the Order's Umbrian province (which encompassed Assisi) and the custodian of the Sacro Convento:

To our beloved sons the minister of the province and the custodian of Saint Francis, greetings and apostolic benediction. Noting, with the scrutiny of our diligent consideration, that the ongoing maintenance of the church of the blessed Francis of Assisi is known to be more than a little expensive, and that a countless multitude of brothers of your Order gathers there, where the most glorious body of the saint himself reposes, and also at the church of Santa Maria of the Porziuncola, for reverence of the same saint, and that the city of Assisi is confined in a small space, and is therefore unable to supply the needs of the same brothers, we are led by the eagerness of our paternal care to provide a remedy, to make suitable provision for

these things. Since, then, it is our intention that whatever is offered, by way of any money or coin in the churches or in the same places by the Christian faithful, be used for this conservation of the same church of Saint Francis, and the support of the brothers gathering at the aforesaid churches and also of those who dwell there, by [these] apostolic letters we order your discretion to have a care to appoint one or several suitable and faithful persons, which person or persons will seem appropriate to you, and who are not from your Order, in the name of the Roman Church, and acting for her, when and as you will think expedient, and [we also order you to] appoint as deputies in their place another person or persons, not of that same Order, as and when you will see fit, who will carefully collect, and diligently guard and conserve whatever is offered in money or coins, in the churches or aforesaid convents by the Christian faithful, as mentioned above. Given at Rieti, on the second Ides of May, in the first year of our pontificate.³



3 Lead seal of Nicholas IV, recto, Assisi, Archivio del Sacro Convento, Bollario VII/220, dated 1288.



4 Lead seal of Nicholas IV, verso, Assisi, Archivio del Sacro Convento, Bollario VII/220, dated 1288.

The second letter (fig. 6), composed the following day, was addressed to 'our beloved sons the [minister] general of the Order of Friars Minor and the ministers of the province of Saint Francis'.⁴ The opening sections repeated verbatim the text of Nicholas's first missive. Again, the pope's instructions were directed to the Umbrian friars, notwithstanding the initial greeting to the minister general of the whole Order. Nicholas ordered 'you, minister of the [Umbrian] province, and also our beloved son the custodian of Saint Francis, through other letters of ours' (evidently referring back to the copies of the first bull) to appoint 'suitable and faithful persons' to collect the alms of the faithful.⁵ But in addition to the text of the first bull, the following lines were appended to the bottom of the second, spelling out in greater detail how Nicholas wished the money to be spent:

Therefore, as we have, in the Lord, particular confidence in your prudence, by the authority of this [letter], we permit you, our sons the ministers, each of you, both in common and separately, to have the aforesaid churches and their convents maintained, repaired, built, modified, enlarged, furnished and decorated [our emphasis], from the aforesaid offerings or alms, by the counsel of wise brothers of the

same church of Saint Francis, when and as your discretion will see fit. And if something is left over from the above-mentioned offerings and alms, it may be used with integrity for the needs of the brothers gathering at the aforesaid churches and convents, and also of those who dwell there, until something else should be arranged by us, or by our successors, the Roman popes, by their letters patent and sealed with the apostolic bull. Given at Rieti, on the Ides of May, in the first year of our pontificate.⁶

Nicholas's call to 'maintain, repair, build, modify, enlarge, furnish and decorate' the Basilica of San Francesco must be read against the context of a building that was architecturally complete and already extensively embellished with images in fresco and glass. Work on the Basilica had begun six decades before *Reducentes*, Pope Gregory IX having laid the foundation stone as early as 1228, less than two years after Francis's death. Construction seems to have progressed with remarkable speed over the next quarter-century. The building was conceived from the outset as a great double basilica, comprising two superimposed structures known simply as the Upper Church and Lower Church (fig. 7). The Lower was intended as the shrine church for Saint Francis, whose



5 Basilica of San Francesco, transepts and nave of the Upper Church, looking towards the counter-façade.

remains were translated there in May 1230 and buried below the high altar at the centre of the crossing.⁷ The Upper was to be a papal throne church, equipped to accommodate the papal liturgy should the curia descend on Assisi – a reasonable expectation given the papal practice of using the central Italian hill towns as seasonal retreats from Rome’s political violence and summer heat. The divide between the two churches also represented an architectural watershed, as the shallow Romanesque arches of the Lower (fig. 8) gave way to the soaring Gothic vaults of the Upper (fig. 9). The string course between the two superimposed apses both marks and masks the transition from a hemispherical to a polygonal plan (fig. 10), and the Upper Church is commonly regarded as the first truly Gothic building in Italy. The principal elements of the Basilica’s superstructure must have been stand-

ing by 1253, when a visiting Polish Dominican described candelabra suspended from the vaults of the Upper Church.⁸ A range of decorative interventions in both the Upper and Lower Churches continued through the next three decades, concentrating on stained glass (another novelty in Italy) and mural painting, but momentum seems to have slowed by the early 1280s.

Sixty years after the Basilica’s foundation and at least thirty-five after its completion, Nicholas’s bulls now called for a comprehensive renewal of San Francesco’s fabric and ornament. They set in motion a radical reconfiguration and expansion of the Basilica complex that far exceeded the ambitions of the original architects or the parameters of the initial design. What is more, *Reducentes* authorized the collection of funds to achieve these goals: the friars were to use